

Last December

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[John "Soap" MacTavish/Simon "Ghost" Riley](#), [background Kyle "Gaz" Garrick/John Price](#)

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[John "Soap" MacTavish](#), [Simon "Ghost" Riley](#), [Kyle "Gaz" Garrick](#), [John Price \(Call of Duty\)](#), [Nikolai \(Call of Duty: Modern Warfare\)](#), [Kate Laswell](#), [Kate Laswell's Wife](#)

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Last December

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Summary

Their last conversation echoes in his mind. He can almost catch it, the pinch behind his nose when he speaks, the gruffness, the Manchester accent. Soap would recognize his voice and his scent anywhere. Ghost smells like home.

When he's back, he doesn't.

or: werewolf Soap is forced to reevaluate his feelings after Ghost comes back to him, and instead of love, he feels hatred brewing inside.

Currently on hiatus

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

the first whispers of a troubled autumn/late december night

September 29, 2023.

Leaves are slowly turning yellow, orange, and red, and Soap watches them fall from behind his window. The woolen socks his mum sent him are warm, the base is quiet. Too quiet.

There is a small trail of blood, leading straight to his window, and an imprinted palm on a nearby tree. His palm, barely visible against dark tree bark. He doesn't like watching this tree, all covered in scratches. The worst part, one that probably terrifies him the most, is the height at which those imprints are located. Soap isn't a short man, not at all, but the claw marks suggest that he would have to be more than two meters tall.

He considers searching for an axe and cutting the tree down. It's getting too hard to ignore it.

The days are getting shorter, and the weather is awful. Watching the approaching sunset, within the last leaf that drops to the ground with a soft rustle, he finds himself falling, too.

A part of him wants to vanish.

In a nearby distance, storm clouds appear. The air grows heavy, Soap takes a deep but shaky breath – he feels alone, even though it isn't exactly true. September rain soaks through the dead leaves, the deciduous forest behind the broken fence grows more saturated. He runs across those thick woods every month when the moon calls him to obey. And he does, he is too weak to resist. Soap is a prisoner inside his own body.

Droplets hit the glass and streak down, he watches them in silence. The earthy scent of petrichor finally hits his nose, the blood disappears in the thick puddle of mud.

He doesn't even look at the sky anymore, not when he thinks about Ghost. He is sick of it. Soap's gaze lingers on grey clouds and follows the sun hiding behind them – it's almost an automatic reaction before he turns his eyes from the window, before he closes them, and tries to forget.

He can't.

Soap shifts in his armchair, sniffing his nose. He smells Kyle right when he hears his footsteps on the other side of a narrow corridor, long before the door to his room opens. Rusty hinges creek and his friend peaks up inside.

"Do you need anything, mate?" Gaz asks and approaches him carefully, a steaming cup of tea in his hands. "You got pretty roughened up during the night, are you sure you're okay? You look like shit."

Soap sends him an apologetic smile, rubbing his arms. He knows he looks bad despite patching himself up and taking a long shower before going to bed this morning. Soap's face is covered in scratches, a few small cuts are hidden behind the bandage on his hands. The jumper he wears is warm but it itches his bruised skin, he considers taking the damn thing off. He runs hot enough to not need most of the outerwear, anyway. But he stays still, he is too exhausted to move.

Gaz steps closer, putting the cup on the window sill with his hands slightly shaking. The man almost spills the beverage, he has to support it with both of his tanned hands. He doesn't look better than Soap by any means, his expression is tired, there are dark circles under his eyes. Soap knows he is the main cause of all of this.

"I'm alright, thanks. How about you? Did I wake you up yesterday?" he questions, aware of the fact that he made it back to the barracks way too late. What he remembers about his return are the sunrise, the thick mist rising above the forest, and the pouring rain. Scrambling to bed, the alarm clock on his phone went off. 5 A.M. He figures it's best to apologize. "I'm sorry if I did."

There is worry threaded between his words, as he really hates the thought of keeping Gaz awake, overwhelmed by the feeling of pure dread. Fortunately enough, it only happens once a month.

"I didn't sleep anyway. I was worried something could happen, so I stayed outside and watched the tree line. Didn't see you, but I heard the howls, though."

His smile drops, Soap hides his face in his hands. He feels horrible, he feels like a grotesque monster, lurking in the woods when the night falls and the full moon shines above.

"You shouldn't be doing that. It's dangerous" he scolds, looking

straight at Gaz. The man scoffs, a playful smirk on his face.

“I had my shotgun with me. I was okay.”

“Kyle, you have to stop doing that. Please...” he begs, hoping to talk some sense into him. Soap is the reason they moved to a remote base in the north. Soap is the reason they had to push most of their duties into the undetermined future. He is a burden, and he feels even worse knowing that Kyle is all alone with him.

Alone with a monster disguised as a human.

The man sits on the armrest of Soap’s chair and shakes his head. Gaz is stubborn, Soap knows that. But his behavior is risky and stupid. Soap still has little to no control over his actions, not when he turns.

“Any news from Ghost?” Gaz suddenly asks. “Or Price? I called them yesterday but no one answered.”

For a week now, he tries to reach them every day.

But Price isn’t responding. The connection got cut two days ago, and it makes him panic. He takes a quick look at the radio Ghost left for him and doesn’t even bother reaching and turning it on. Soap is afraid of the static buzz that awaits him on the other side, he refuses to listen to it.

“No, but I hope they are okay. It’s been three months since they left...” he mutters with sadness behind his blue eyes. Sometimes when he looks at himself in the mirror, he swears they look golden, only for a few seconds, before he blinks. He is probably overreacting, though, there are yellow rings around his pupils, and maybe he sees them instead – because he wants to look out for something strange. Soap still doesn’t understand what is happening to him.

“They were supposed to be back by now. That’s what we all agreed on” Gaz states. “I miss Price and his dry jokes. And I miss going on missions together. I love you, mate, but being stuck with you is boring.”

“Aye, fuck you” Soap grins, playfully punching Kyle’s arm. He makes sure to use less force than he initially wants to, keeping in mind that everything is more fragile now compared to his brute strength. “I miss them, too. Simon-“

“Ugh...” Kyle stops him with a displeased groan. “Can’t spend 5

minutes without talking about your boyfriend, can you?"

"He's not my boyfriend" he protests, wishing he was lying. But he isn't.

It's... complicated.

Soap wants to reach him, but he knows full well it's not possible. The man has been gone for too long now, his deep voice slowly fades away, and the warmth of his body is only a frail memory. But his skull mask remains drilled into Soap's memory – he used to stare at it and wonder if it was real. If the man stole it from somewhere, if the front bones once belonged to a living human being. He recalls it looking dry and raw, textured enough to make his mind speculate.

He is never convinced enough, though. When Ghost is nearby, he can't smell the death on him. Soap picks up a lot of different scents, mostly gunpowder and minty shower gel, but not the stench of death – something surprising, considering their job and the violence that follows them everywhere.

"But he could be if you were less insecure about it" Gaz snickers and he is right. The words sink in, and Soap thinks about it.

He rolls his eyes and watches Gaz leave his room. When he is alone once again, he tries to distract himself. But he still misses Simon.

He could write him another letter and shove it to the bottom of his nightstand drawer. Pour his heart into a paper, turn running thoughts into a cluster of meaningless words. And then, crumble the sheet, so heavily dotted with tears, and push the words to the back of his mind. Right where they belong.

His love doesn't matter, Ghost would never love a monster like him, back. Soap remembers all the begs and broken pleas spoken the night before Simon left, he remembers the morning after.

"You smell like a wet dog" Ghost laughs with his teeth visible, a view so rare he can't help but stare at those sharp canines. Not as sharp as his, but edged just enough to leave him with a couple of fresh marks. The man reaches to grasp his mask, but Soap doesn't let him. His eyes are big and pleading, his voice still raw and husky as he speaks.

"Do you really have to go?" he asks, draped in the sheets and holding onto Ghost's naked arm, not ready to let go. Simon hums before placing a small kiss on top of his head, just to adorn the morning with something sweet and

innocent.

Soap lies on the bed all lazy, he gets pulled into a full kiss. It grows more profound, a growl escapes from the top of his chest as he disapproves of them parting just yet. He wants another moment, another glance, and another stolen kiss he can cling on to later – when his bed is cold and empty, and he needs a reminder of Ghost's presence.

He is sweaty after an eventful night, his skin sticky just like Ghost's. Before the man disappears, he wants to put a label on their ongoing situation, but he doesn't even try. He is happy with what they have, despite craving much more. Nagging could only make things between them worse, and Soap isn't in the right mood to argue.

"Johnny" Ghost whispers, pulling away to collect himself. "I need to find the cure, I need to... I want to help you. It's all my fault."

"Simon" he starts with a serious tone, but Ghost silences him with a chaste kiss. He wants to tell him that it's okay, that what happened is no one's fault. But Ghost doesn't want to listen to him, not when it comes to the curse.

"I'll be back" Ghost promises, and for Soap it sounds like 'I love you' in disguise. He looks the other way to get rid of the unwanted thought.

"I'll be waiting, then" he gives in, letting go of Simon's hand – 'I love you to the Moon and back.'

Maybe one day, he will tell him the truth.

He watches him pull his pants on, Soap's heart already feels troubled. He can't join him, not this time. Traveling is too risky in his case. He can only hope that the man finds his way back to him, just like he always has.

They don't share a hug or a last kiss. Ghost just shuts the door behind him without much care that he's making a lot of noise. Soap remains buried in the bed and doesn't even follow him with his eyes.

Maybe they both believe that the mission will soon be over and that there is no need to say goodbye. They are wrong.

Their last conversation echoes in his mind. He can almost catch it, the pinch behind his nose when he speaks, the gruffness, the Manchester accent. Soap would recognize his voice and his scent anywhere. Ghost smells like home.

He knows Ghost isn't the one to keep promises, but this is just cruel.

Come back to me, he pleads. *Drop everything and come back.*

Their last kiss was at the beginning of hot summer, now he watches the autumn arrive. He no longer yearns to feel Ghost's lips against his, he just wants their hands to touch.

Soap keeps wasting his day away, counting the weeks that divide him from Ghost. He considers calling Laswell, to let her know that Price and Ghost are nowhere to be found. But he can't bring himself to do it. Seeing Price and Ghost declared as MIA kills his hope of ever seeing them again. It's like admitting to defeat before the real fight begins.

Not yet, he keeps repeating to himself. *Not yet.*

The morning they parted is nothing compared to the January night it began, though. Soap doesn't want to think about it, but he has to. He needs to figure out the answer, he needs to sort out his mixed emotions.

But when he thinks back, shadows start to dance in his mind, their arms keep reaching – pulling Soap to the middle of an immersing memory, trying to drown him in the heavy remnant of the full moon. The first one he got to really experience, surely not the last. He chokes, opening wide, nails clawing at the chair in a desperate attempt to keep himself above the surface. He fails miserably, gaze falls on wolf skin draped across his bedframe, brown fur looking grayer in the cool evening light.

He doesn't know why he decided to keep it, a part of it is burned, sharp canines make him freak out when he sees them glisten in the approaching darkness. The fur itself is thick and tangled, he doesn't care to keep it maintained.

He isn't going to wear it again, he doesn't even touch it. Still, something draws him to it.

December 31, 2022.

Soap is sitting on the floor and packing his suitcase. He is almost done, only his snow boots are waiting in line to get stuffed into an already overpacked space. The list is long but quite simple: a couple of thick jumpers, warm pajamas, an additional jacket, thermal

underwear, and toiletries. He believes that traveling lightly is better than overpacking, he can always borrow some stuff from others, after all. With a tired grunt, he pushes everything aside in an attempt to fit his boots there. He is still surprised at how many clothes he has.

He eventually manages to fit everything inside and closes his suitcase. The zipper is stubborn, it won't move. Soap sits on top of it, squashing it down, and zips it close. It almost looks comical, how frustrated he is. Right when he finishes, the door to his room opens and Ghost walks inside without an invitation.

"What are you doing?" the man chuckles, voice hinting amusement. Soap looks at him, noticing one important detail that leaves his throat dry, his eyes stay locked in place. The mask is gone, and it feels like God himself sent an angel to visit him in the confines of his room. Johnny feels blessed, he smiles seeing the halo of Simon's golden hair shining in the yellow artificial light. He wants to reach out and touch it – confirm that what he is seeing is, in fact, real.

In this shock, he forgets to answer. He bites his tongue before a mindless tease can slip out.

"I'm wrapping up the packing" he answers and stands up from his knees, hoping that the zipper won't burst open. "I have to change, but then I'm ready to go party a little."

"Price sent me to hurry you up" Ghost smirks, sitting down on his bed. "Everyone's packed and ready to move tomorrow, I should have guessed that this simple task would be too much for you, sergeant."

Soap rolls his eyes, not even wanting to respond. He lives in the future, in their most deserved break. After months of hard work and endless risky adventures, 141 finally has time to leave for a small vacation. As much as he likes to hang around and base, he knows that they need a break. The Christmas season is always busy, especially this year when they continued their chase after terrorists and had to push their most deserved leave until later.

Today is New Year's Eve, and even though Soap doesn't set his expectations too high for the small celebration, he is excited about their trip tomorrow. 2 whole weeks they can spend exploring Romania and playing in the snow, visiting castles and drinking their nights off at the hotel.

Soap changes into another shirt, Ghost's gaze stings when he's standing shirtless in front of him. He blushes and quickly covers

himself, a little surprised by the hungry expression he is not used to seeing. Is this what Ghost looks like underneath his mask every time he stares at him?

“Let’s go, loser” he laughs, ready to go.

They walk to the mess hall together, with their hands almost touching, steps synchronized. Soap read once that when you get really close to someone, your heart starts to beat in the same rhythm as theirs. His cheeks flush at the realization, he can’t help but wonder. Soap’s heart starts throbbing when their fingers intertwine, he wonders if it has the same effect on Ghost. A simple gesture, yet it leaves his palm sweaty and his mind spinning.

Is this love? Soap can’t be sure, not after so little time. But he knows that maybe this is the beginning of something new, that the future holds something great for the both of them.

When they arrive and Ghost’s hand slips out of his hold, Soap longs for its warmth.

Price and Gaz are waiting for them, it’s already late. Soap isn’t in the right mood to celebrate, his mind occupied by Ghost’s weird behavior as well as the thrill of their future trip. They push him down to sit and handle him a drink, he is not complaining. Ghost stays by his side, the whole room is busy with soldiers that didn’t leave for the holidays. Price disappears when his phone rings, Gaz walks away to talk with a group of rookies.

Soap watches the ice sunken in his scotch, he swirls the glass around and appreciates the amber liquid. Sipping on it slowly, he asks Ghost:

“Any New Year resolutions?” it comes out as an innocent tease. Soap smiles and scoots closer to him on the slouchy sofa, their glasses clinking together.

“Just survive, I guess” Ghost laughs. Soap’s eyes squint, this is the answer he predicted. “What about you, Johnny?”

“Maybe draw more? But I don’t know, honestly... I always give up on mine mid-January” he responds honestly.

“How typical” the man scoffs, sending him a playful smirk. Soap rolls his eyes, fighting the urge to shove his arm and call him an asshole.

“At least mine isn’t lame” he snickers with a grin.

They sit alone. Simon makes him feel like nothing else matters. Just the two of them, and with every whisper, Soap grows more convinced that it is, in fact, love. They giggle and stand up in unison. A perfect time for a smoke.

They go outside, ignoring the ongoing party. Ghost pulls out his pack of smokes and they decide to share, both leaning against the wall. The sky is empty, snow crunches under their boots. Soap is cold, but he doesn't bother leaving. He just stands there, waiting for his turn to smoke.

"Ever thought of retiring?" he leans against Simon's arm, exhaling a thick cloud of smoke. His eyes hold a silent plea, something only Ghost would catch. After everything, they understand each other beyond using words.

"Maybe one day..." Ghost says, reaching for the cig. Their fingers brush, leaving his skin tingling with warmth. "I'll probably wait till we both can go out."

"Really?" he asks, giving the cig back.

Ghost takes a puff, he glances at Soap.

"I'd be lost without you" and Soap never expects the answer to be so simple.

He takes a last drag before tossing the burning filter into the pile of snow. Ghost's words make him feel something indescribable, and despite the freezing wind, he finds himself melting.

"Johnny" Ghost muses, setting his drink on the ground and reaching to grab Soap's hand. He doesn't think too much of it, they do it a lot. But this time it feels different, Ghost's hand is pulling him closer, and refuses to let go. Seconds divide them from New Year's Day, the excitement grows. It's their first celebration, their new beginning.

Ghost steps closer, and he loses his view of the rest of the team. They are still inside, he hears them count. *What is he doing?*

"3... 2... 1...!" everyone yells, and when the clock strikes midnight, Ghost leans in to kiss him.

It's a deep kiss. Soap tastes the liquor and detects a subtle aftertaste of cigarettes on Ghost's tongue. It only lasts a few seconds before they are both breathless, hands shaking in anticipation.

Soap pulls away with his mouth open, eyes slightly clouded. This is something he didn't expect to happen tonight, yet he is fully enjoying the moment. He feels like he has been waiting for it ever since Las Almas.

"Simon..." he whispers in shock, touching his lips with his fingers. Ghost's forehead falls against his, and for a split second, they just stand there.

"Quick, before they realize we're gone" the man whispers back, dragging him back to the room and straight to the bathroom. Soap gets pushed against the wall, Ghost's lips find their way to his exposed neck, nose brushing against his short stubble.

His breath hitches, mind goes fuzzy as Simon's lips keep on sucking. He groans, Ghost presses his palm against his lips and starts licking on his pulse.

He hears the music and chatter thudding in the background, but what he listens to is the loud clasp of Ghost's belt and the zipper coming undone.

under the moon

Chapter Notes

TW for blood drinking, enjoy

September 30, 2023.

According to different schools of philosophy, there are many possible purposes to life. Cynicism and taking care of one's own needs. Confucianism and fulfilling your duty. Theism and following God's will, platonism and seeking knowledge, pragmatism and bringing value. Ghost can think of numerous other examples in search of finding the one that suits him most.

Between missions, he has read too many books and now his mind won't shut up – he's just got to make pointless digressions that get him nowhere. Life has either subjective, objective or no meaning whatsoever. Ghost doesn't know which one it is for him now. It might as well change abruptly and he won't even notice, just like the last time.

But maybe the answer is much simpler than what he expects it to be. Maybe Soap is his only real purpose, maybe it was all pointless before he marched into his life. After all, Johnny makes him stand and walk, laugh, and even love for the first time in forever.

For months now, the intricate longing and heart-wrenching guilt keep him going. The solemn promise of helping Soap is behind every step he takes, every thought that crosses his mind. He is bound to break the curse and save his lover from suffering, he has to keep going, keep searching...

Ghost can't move, ropes bite harshly into the delicate skin of his wrists, ankles, and thighs, holding him in place. They are mostly secured around his joints, knots complex and tight. His nerves tingle, flesh feels numb, like the only thing he can truly experience is burning, like he really turned into a ghost – an unholy creature trapped in between two worlds, condemned to the eternal punishment of feeling everything, yet nothing at all.

Underneath the gibbous moon, night breathes in all the blood that still hangs in the air, that covers the walls and the floor, his bare hands, and the toe caps of his boots. He should be repulsed by it, it's thick

and sticky, almost dry, but it smells so sweet he can almost taste it. His tongue swipes across his sharp teeth, fangs more prominent than ever. They sting his tongue, Ghost doesn't remember them ever being so sharp and pointy.

He opens his eyes slowly, reluctantly, only to force them shut right away. The room is too bright regardless of the late hour, his eyes are sore and sensitive, and he wants to rub the sleep out of them – but still, he doesn't move.

Ghost's heartbeat is faint, he hears it – amidst the silence, a single spasm of a muscle, a light pulse that shakes his body every several seconds or so. The realization makes him inhale deeply, as he feels completely gutted. The panic doesn't stop there, it grows worse tenfold. Too much cold air enters his empty nostrils at once, causing darting pain to explode in his skull. Ghost doesn't know what is happening to him, he doesn't remember how exactly did he find himself in this situation. All he knows is that he needs to help Soap, they were so close to finally discovering the answer, the stress has been keeping him awake for weeks now.

He fights against his restraints, a small grunt interrupts his tries. He can easily get rid of the unwanted binds if he wants, snap the rope, and free his hands. But he decides not to, he is restrained for a reason, after all.

"You finally woke up" comes Price's rumble voice. It drags him away from his thoughts and back to reality, away from his Johnny. Ghost is compelled to look at him, out of pure respect, against the sharp light that burns his bloodshot eyes. He glances around the same small shack he found himself falling asleep a couple of days ago – after his pained screams dissolved in the howling wind, after he cried for so long he couldn't hear his voice anymore.

He notices the rusty-colored blood, old antlers hanging on the wooden walls, a stained carpet, and a broken window that lets the thin beams of moonlight inside. Before he sees the captain – sitting on the other side of the room, he hears his heartbeat, much more lively than his own. What a strange sensation, to hear a heartbeat of a could-be prey, to understand the emotions hiding behind the steady rhythm of one's heart.

"Price" he rasps with his throat dry, not letting his face contort into a broken frown. The mask stretches around his mouth and chin and brushes against his 5 o'clock shadow, but keeps his expression a

secret. “What the fuck happened?”

He wishes he could remember a thing other than the ache. His mind remains empty, the only thing he can focus on is the overwhelming hunger, a new type of starvation – lust buried deep within him, a sudden craving for something forbidden. He glances down at his hands, dry blood peeling off his skin. Ghost wants to reach out and lick them clean, he fights the urge to move his elbows. The hunger silences all his other senses, he can barely think of anything besides the want, the primal need to feed.

Price’s attention is all over him, but the captain doesn’t move nor say anything, still occupied in the other corner, a Glock in his hand. He is looking for something in his bag, Ghost can’t tell what it is, he only sees his back.

“Nik and I had to save your stupid ass and drag you all the way back here. You woke up shortly after you got bitten and attacked me. Shit, you’re stronger than I expected” Price says, he can feel his strained voice, the panic raising, blood flowing quicker. “I will feed you in a second but you need to keep calm. Can you do that for me, soldier?”

The man doesn’t collaborate any further, letting the heavy weight of his words sink in, letting Ghost choose whether to accept this answer or not. He remembers being bitten but he pushes the memory back for now, trying to comprehend Price’s other words as they sound too terrifying to be true. Did he really strike his captain? What kind of cruel mother has he become? Is the blood on his hands, Price’s?

A fresh bandage wrapped around the captain’s entire forearm only seems to confirm it. His stomach drops, he doesn’t know how to apologize.

Ghost nods and Price slowly walks his way, his step silent and alert. Captain still grips on his pistol, his finger rests underneath the trigger. But in his other hand, he holds something else, a blood pouch – one used for transfusions. Ghost’s eyes are wide when he follows the bag filled up to the brim, enticing him with its contents. He doesn’t get it, he’s not bleeding out, he’s not hurt, yet his body needs it more than air.

Price crunches in front of his closed legs, opens the pouch, and sticks the tube inside. He carefully grabs Ghost’s mask, just above the nose, then yanks it up. Price’s hands are shaking slightly when the straw gets placed between the parted lips, maybe they both don’t believe

what is happening. Ghost's tongue wraps around the cool plastic and traces the rough spout.

"Drink" a lawful order that he doesn't dare to disobey. A part of his remaining humanity screams that it's disgusting, that it will only leave him with a metallic aftertaste and nausea he despises so much. Ghost knows the feeling of drowning in his own blood, he knows that drinking it is the last thing he wants to do. But the moment he sucks and the very first drop falls on his tongue, his nerves blow up with something similar to pure ecstasy. His eyes roll inside his skull, his head falls back and hits the wall with force.

Ghost lets out a low groan, Price doesn't say anything else – he just watches, waiting patiently for him to be done.

The blood is warm when he sips it, it feels somewhat fresh. He should be embarrassed, lapping on every drop like a starved animal, swallowing it down his throat so greedily he's afraid he's going to choke. Ghost is so eager that some of the liquid escapes his mouth and streaks down his chin. It looks messy, he hates that Price has to witness him in this state. It doesn't feel real.

Blood continues to leak, and his tongue runs after it, causing even more to spill.

Such a waste, he thinks, sucking on the tube and holding it between his teeth. Seconds later, the bag is completely drained out, he bares his bloody teeth. Price rolls his mask down, back in place, his fingers barely pinching it – like he's afraid that Ghost would bite him at any given moment.

He understands his concerns and keeps still, hunger fades away for now. On his tongue, instead of plasma, he feels the bitter taste of guilt and shame.

"Jesus, your eyes are bloody red, mate. Here" the captain stares him right in the eyes after stepping back, but he turns his head away and digs his hand into the pocket of his cargo pants. Ghost hums, waiting for a small piece of broken mirror to be held up to the height of his face.

It's shiny and... and the only thing he sees is the dark wall behind him. His eyes are squinted, breath picks up. Ghost turns his head in disbelief, making sure that it's the same wall he sees in the mirror. It is.

“What the fuck..?” he whispers in dread, ignoring Price’s judging look.

Is this a joke? He almost asks.

Then, he continues to stare back at the mirror, he wants to hold it in his own hands and turn it around, he desperately wants to see his reflection there. But mirrors are reflections of one’s soul and Ghost doesn’t have it anymore. How can he even exist? How is this even possible?

“We’re going back to England” Price states after a while, and before Ghost can protest, he continues. “We need to regroup and think of another plan. Besides, we have bigger problems now, much bigger. You let yourself get turned into a vampire like the biggest idiot, Simon.”

Like an idiot... And maybe Price is right, because Ghost still objects, blinded by the only thing he understands, love. He growls in disapproval, his muscles clenching, ropes tense around him.

“Absolutely not. I’m staying, I promised Jo-”

“Nikolai!” the captain suddenly calls out, interrupting him. “Did you get what I asked you for?”

The wooden floor creaks under the heavy steps of Nik, when did he get there? The smell of his cigarette is irritating his nose, he can smell the booze lingering on his body. Nikolai carries something Ghost can’t really recognize and handles it to Price.

“I’m sorry, Ghost” is the only thing the man says, tapping Ghost’s shoulder as an apology.

Before he can fully understand what is going on, Price’s rough hands rub against the cotton material of his mask, securing a few pieces of wide straps around his head. Ghost shifts in protest, his teeth grate loudly the moment a muzzle is placed around his mouth and jaw, locking it in place. He can’t open his mouth, solid metal clasps click behind his head.

“I’m sorry” Price whispers with his voice broken from tears, two hearts shattering instead of one. “I’m so sorry, son.”

Ghost moves his wrists closer to his face, fingers hook underneath the straps in the hope of pulling them off, but the material is too strong, it

won't budge. Where did they find this thing? He can't do anything against it, he can only wail in despair.

Defeated, he tries to speak. Nothing but a pathetic mumble comes out.

"I'm taking you home, soldier. Whether you like it or not."

Price turns to speak with Nik, in the well of his mind, he hears Johnny talking.

"Do you really have to go?" Soap asks him, and he curses the answer that is bound to leave his lips. The man is holding onto him like Ghost's a lifeline – but in reality, he is more like an anchor. If he stays, he will drag them both to hit rock bottom.

He hums, kissing the top of his head, nuzzling against Soap's mohawk.

Soap is looking at him with those big blue eyes of his and suddenly, one kiss is not enough. It will never be. Ghost grabs his chin and pulls him into something more sating, he needs something to remember him by. But Soap is greedy, he demands more, and Ghost gives in just like he always does, answering Soap's passion with his own.

"Johnny" he whispers, his voice is nothing more than a plea. He pulls away, caressing his cheek with his thumb. "I need to find the cure, I need to... I want to help you. It's all my fault."

Let me help you, he begs silently in his thoughts. Let me make it right.

He is ready to fall to his knees and beseech him to stop being so tempting. He can only resist for so long.

"Simon" Soap starts, he doesn't want to listen to it. He gives him a small kiss because he knows that if Soap requests him to stay one more time, he might do just that.

"I'll be back" he promises, knowing full well that when he's back, nothing will be able to tear him away from the man. He wants... He needs to spend the rest of his life with him.

"I'll be waiting" Soap says back, letting him go.

Ghost dresses up, not even looking at Johnny, afraid that it will change his mind.

Soap doesn't make a sound. Leaving has never been so hard, his heart has

never beaten so loud. The slam of the door sounds like a heart being snapped in half.

Nikolai grabs his crossed wrists and throws him to the car parked just in front of their shack. The engine starts, a tear slips down his cheek when they force him away from hope. Ghost wants to fight it, but the gun barrel pressed against his temple cools down the burning ardor. He's got no choice, he can't even voice it.

I'm coming home, Johnny.

They leave behind the lunar chill of the last September night.

January 1, 2023.

Ghost kisses him like it's the first and only chance he is ever going to have, like he needs to feel Soap's lips on his in order to function properly. He's been dreaming of this moment for two months now, imagining the way Soap would taste and sound, especially how good he would feel underneath the inexperienced touch of his trembling hands.

He knows it all started after they left Chicago, when Soap's clingy personality along with his wide smile seemed to warm his heart just enough to sneak in unnoticed. It's been a slow process, but the moment of realization hit him like a ton of bricks. Ghost doesn't know how it happened, maybe it was his loneliness that got the best of him, maybe Soap is a real charmer – it doesn't matter, it's done. Ghost wants him, no, he loves him, now he's sure of that.

Soap's lips are soft, his shaky pants sound beautiful – Ghost wants nothing more than to hear them right by his ear. And he does, when he kisses down to his neck, Soap's cheek is pressed right to his. He can hear a little “*mhm*” leaving Johnny's mouth after each wet kiss, he can't get enough. So Ghost starts to suck and bite, and lick, the sounds grow desperate and he thanks him by giving him more.

Lust runs in his veins, it's visible now – his cheeks are pink, eyes half-lidded and dark. He keeps Soap trapped between the wall and his chest, before grabbing his wrists and pinning them above the man's head. And Johnny lets him, it's the only confirmation he needs to continue.

Ghost's fingers tingle with electricity when they trace the cold clasp of

Soap's belt. He opens it swiftly as if he's been practicing his whole life for this. One kiss leaves them both breathless and panting, one cheeky smirk and he feels like this night, he belongs to Soap.

"Johnny..." he whispers with all the strength he can muster, like his name is the only thing that remains when his mind turns into a mush. Ghost doesn't even understand English anymore, his words are gone as soon as the darkness swallows the barracks and the memory of Soap comes running, instead. And it's true – late at night, when everyone is long asleep, Soap's name echoes in his room and chokes out of him as a desperate plea, a prayer for no one to hear but the moon.

"Simon, Simon, I..."

He growls, hearing his name coming from Soap in such a different, intimate way. It's breathy and full of yearning, his insides twist. Ghost closes his eyes, lips resting against his pulse, he waits.

"We're drunk" Soap eventually says, he closes his eyes and falls to support himself against Ghost's larger frame. Ghost understands, he really does.

"We're not" he protests anyway, with a light chuckle and a tender wrap of his arms. He feels Soap relaxing, and he starts to do it, too. They just stand together without saying anything, because words are useless in their case. They are so very different and yet the same, like two sides of one coin, Ghost predicts Soap's next words.

"I don't want to pretend like it never happened when we wake up tomorrow."

I don't want to pretend that I don't want you, he decides not to say.

Ghost nods. In a moment like this, he wants to reveal his true intentions. But maybe it's too early for that. He thinks of a different answer.

"You don't have to pretend, not when it's me."

It means "*I love you, Johnny*" just as much.

"Let's go back to your room and cuddle. And drink ourselves to sleep. Let's take it nice and slow" Soap proposes, grasping his hands, and dragging them both to the logical side of their desperation.

"Okay" he agrees, kissing his lips one more time, and pulling back,

letting Soap smarten himself up. “Okay, let’s go slow, Johnny.”

If that’s what it takes for Soap to trust him, he’s ready to wait. The situation makes him worried, but the warmth of Soap’s skin, a shy touch of a hand when they walk together through the mess hall, melts it all away.

When the morning comes, they scramble out of his bed. He refuses to kiss Soap until they brush their teeth, giggling in the bathroom because they both slowly realize that they could have it ever since the beginning, that maybe their names are written in the stars right next to each other.

Ghost carries him to bed and lies directly on top of him because Johnny is cold. Someone bangs on the door but he ignores it just to have Soap for a moment longer. He knows the plane is waiting, and suddenly he doesn’t want to go. His breath is hot on his neck, and Soap’s hands burn through his T-shirt like the material is nothing compared to the heat.

“You’re sweet” Soap mumbles and Ghost bites his arm. With a hissed “*ouch*”, the man pushes him away, a smile still plastered on his face.

“You’re sweeter” Ghost answers before going back to biting, marking his favorite parts of Soap’s as his own.

They are both sweet in different ways. The future is there to prove it.

He doesn't smell like home

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the longer break, to be fair I had a very shitty 2 weeks. Anyway, here's the chapter, enjoy.

October 2, 2023.

Soap looks at the gate. The rain pours down on him mercilessly, ruining his mohawk and soaking his clothes heavy. He looks and feels like a wet dog, arms trembling from cold, eyes observing the road that disappears between the thick woods. He leans against one of the steel bollards near the parking lot, axe in his hand, he waits for the car that will never pull into the driveway. He was in the middle of work when he saw something, a shy spark of the headlights, a silver car flashing between the trees. Price's car.

He knows it's all an illusion, designed to pull him from his chores and into the fog of pessimistic thoughts. His mind isn't going to let him rest, it only wants to trick him. And it works just perfectly, he stops everything and watches. Soap knows to expect them to come back, but at the same time, he won't hold his breath on that promise.

His phone is unlocked, but he doesn't pay much attention to it. Instead, he lets the rain slide down the bright screen and over the latest message he received, just this morning. Soap read it countless times by now, his face expressing nothing but a reverie. He can't think of a reply good enough to send back.

The crowning of his long message history with Ghost is a two-line text, that makes his breath hitch with worry, tears mixing with the rain.

I'll be home, soon.

But it's never going to be the same, Johnny.

He wonders about its true meaning because those words... Oh, they're so heavy he can barely hold his phone in his hand without dropping it. His thumb hovers above the screen, it's twitching. With his touch unsteady, he hits the send button and sighs. A part of him hopes Ghost never reads his response.

I miss you, anyway.

It's cheeky, it's dumb, it's so totally Soap. He couldn't come up with anything better than that.

It's been hours, though, and he slowly starts to believe that it's a lie, just an excuse created to make him feel better. He doesn't. Soap worries that something might have happened to them, he doesn't know anything more than the fact that they're coming. He isn't feeling ready to see Simon, he is afraid that their long-awaited encounter would end up awkward, forced even.

He still loves him.

But what is left of their love besides a meaningless word? An empty shape of a feeling once so intense, a hole in his heart that is begging to be filled with Simon before the wound fully closes. When he shows up today, will Soap even recognize him?

He can see that Ghost received a message, he's being left on read. The answer doesn't come, he grows impatient. He tries again.

Everything is still the same, I promise.

He is yet to find out, how wrong this statement is.

Soap thinks, and thinks, and thinks. Until the pouring rain gets pushed into the background and the only thing he truly hears is Simon's voice, interrupted by his own labored breath. The tears stop running as he calms down, he finds the situation mildly comforting. He is outside to prune the spreading branches of his least favorite tree, it blocks his view at the main gate. He doesn't move to cut it yet, but when he does, he butchers it instead. Soap takes swing after swing, because the axe, it whispers.

"Soap!" a call, a small chance, a promise. He is drawn to the call, he cannot help but close his eyes and listen.

The blade sinks into the tree trunk, he grunts when he tries to remove it. Another deep swing, another solid hit. For a second, he forgets that he's only pretending, that the voice he hears is only a projection he created to fill the void.

The branches shake, a few leaves fall to the ground, some of them tangle in his hair.

"Soap!" and it sounds like it's more than just his name. He feels like he's underwater, sinking. The voice is muffled, it grows distant – it's

fleeting, it's gone before he can reach out and grasp it. Even then, it would probably slip through his fingers.

“Soap!”

It's like he's in a deep trance, Gaz's voice breaks him from it. With a snap of impatient fingers, Soap freezes. He is startled by the sudden exclaim. He sets the axe aside, opens his eyes. Was Gaz there this entire time?

“What did this poor tree do to you, mate?” Kyle's voice is mostly teasing him, but Soap senses some concern in there, too. He looks at his friend, frowning. His eyes switch to the tree, the lower branches are broken, the scratches etch the tree beige.

“It's more about... what *I* did to the tree” he snarls, picking up the axe. Gaz takes a step back when Soap continues to cut the tree down. He pants, not sure if he should continue explaining himself, making up more excuses. “I just hate looking at it, and it's right in front of my damn window.”

“You can just switch rooms if that's a problem. The base is fucking empty, mate. Or you can stop staring at your window all day” Gaz proposes, he makes it sounds too simple. Soap shakes his head, he made up his mind. The tree has to go for the sake of his own brittle sanity.

“I already damaged it enough” he argues, not really convinced. “It's a matter of time before it dies.”

Soap doesn't know much about trees, but his words sound about right. The damage has been done, his claws deprived the tree of its protective tissue. Watching the tree slowly deteriorate will only confirm him of his animalistic cruelty. Kyle doesn't stop him. With one last hit, the tree drops to the ground, the remaining leaves fall.

Gaz helps him move it. It's hard work, Soap does most of it, anyway. He grags it by its branches, and Gaz pushes it from behind. They can always chop it later, they need to gather more firewood before the winter comes.

His phone buzzes when he wipes his hands on his pants.

You don't understand.

He swallows nervously, heading inside.

Make me understand , he pleads in his mind. *Please, Simon* . He doesn't dare to reply.

Soap takes a shower and changes into something dry, Gaz waits for him outside his room. He can sense his presence but he doesn't question it, he just does his thing.

"They're coming back" Gaz says when Soap opens the door and steps outside.

"I know" he whispers, still not quite believing it. "Don't know when, but they're coming."

Soap knows Kyle is about to say something that will likely break him or make his day.

"In an hour or a little less than that."

Soap goes back outside.

The car stops in front of the gate. Nikolai steps out to lift the barrier, Price drives through. Soap watches the silver car, he swears he saw it before today. He doesn't see Ghost there, probably sitting in the back.

He doesn't move an inch, all of Ghost's mysterious texts finally get the best of him. He doesn't move closer than necessary, standing in the rain, waiting. They all exit the car, he sees Ghost. At first, he smiles, but then, he just frowns. Something isn't right.

Price walks behind him, presumably holding his wrists or forearms. Soap doesn't think much of it at first, Ghost looks like he's tired, his head hangs low, gaze fixed on the ground.

The sun comes out from behind the clouds, it paints Simon's hair golden. He hums in admiration, he loves how messy they look, he always has. Hair?

Then, he notices. Ghost lifts his head.

It's not Simon... The man that walks towards him, meters away, he only resembles Ghost he knows. Light hair, furrowed brows, crooked nose. That much Soap remembers because how could he ever forget? But his skin is pale, so pale and lifeless, almost opaque with some of his dark veins visible. It makes Soap gasp. He can't control it, it makes

him feel dizzy with confusion.

He takes a step back and hits Gaz's chest. The man only puts a hand on Soap's shoulder and holds him in place. He braces himself for the truth. They've been hiding it all from him, he knows it. Ghost's eyes open.

They are red and predatory, staring right past his soul, making him shiver. Soap feels uncomfortable, his stomach twists, throat clenches at the sight.

"Welcome back" he is supposed to say with a wide grin and run up to them like nothing has happened. He doesn't. In his heart, there's silence, and then – a deep blow of something foreign, something that comes with the first tentative breath. Ghost is almost in front of him, he can smell him.

Usually, his lungs choke with fondness when he smells Ghost. He makes Soap feel at home, he makes him feel safe and secure. But now, Soap holds his breath, refusing to inhale the air stained with the stench that isn't so warm anymore. It's different, it makes him panic, it scorches his nerves raw.

In the air, hangs nothing more than death. *Danger*, his brain screams.

Is this a muzzle secured around his head? Why is he wearing a muzzle?

At first, he confuses it with a mask, but now he sees it clearly. It looks tight, the metal clasps and locks ring when Ghost moves. He can't stand it, the way Ghost looks is desperate, pained... hungry.

Soap doesn't know what's going on, he doesn't ask. The man in front of him isn't his Simon, his brain recognizes him, but his heart... his heart mourns his lover.

He is always the one to fill the silence, the awkward conversations, the gaps left between the sentences. For the first time, he looks up and opens his mouth – and walks away from them with nothing to say.

He doesn't turn his head, not once, not when a shaky groan reaches his ears, not when the anger makes him shake with something primal, something he doesn't yet understand.

This isn't his Simon.

January 2, 2023.

Their flight is delayed because of the heavy snowstorm. For Soap, it seems like his life wants to desperately prove to him that everything he truly needs can be taken away from him very quickly. They drove to Manchester despite their obvious hangover the day before, and the moment Price told them that their plane is not departing, he's been wanting to just turn back and forget about their trip. Soap already expects it to be bad, his intuition suggests that if he stays, he is only going to regret it.

He is seconds away from listening to his inner voice, he wants to drive back to base and do absolutely nothing for the rest of his leave. But then, Ghost steps up and offers the team to just spend the night at his place. And who is Soap to refuse? His curiosity makes him nod his head and obediently follow the team back to the car.

Soap's never been there before. Of course, he knew Ghost has a house, but in his jokes, it's always an empty apartment with a mattress on the ground and a couple of boxes serving as storage. He doesn't expect it to be so lively, so cozy, so... Simon. Like Ghost never existed, he gets to know the other side of his friend. He glances around Ghost's bedroom, Price and Gaz are occupying the second one.

He walks around. He sees a few photos, none of them exposing too much of Ghost's past. The oldest one is from his graduation, Simon is holding his diploma and hugging a middle-aged woman, who Soap assumes is his mother. Next, there's one taken at the wedding with Ghost embracing his brother, standing next to him, all proud. Soap doesn't remember his name. In the last photo, Simon is holding his nephew in his arms, they look beyond happy. Soap traces his finger against the frame and notices there is no dust covering it, the fact makes him chuckle.

Soap sets his backpack and suitcase next to the bed, his hand swipes across fresh sheets. On the bedside table, there's another frame and he gasps when he sees it. A picture of them, taken in Las Almas. Ghost is standing right next to Soap, they're squished together on the plane, Ghost still in his mask, but his eyes tell him everything. They're dark and yet so bright with something he cannot understand, looking at *him* instead of the camera.

The shower stops, Ghost walks into the room a moment later.

“Curiosity killed the cat, ever heard that one?” Simon asks, putting his chin over Soap’s shoulder. He tenses under Ghost’s sudden touch, setting the frame down. Soap wants to turn his back and face him, but he much rather prefers looking at the only physical evidence of their friendship. Ghost is wet, water streaks down his skin and onto Johnny’s pajamas. His mask is covering the top part of his face, the material looks damp.

“Didn’t know you kept it. You’re going soft on me now?” he attempts to tease.

“Come here” Ghost says, ignoring Soap’s question, leaving him pouting. But he obeys, leaning into a chaste kiss, one that doesn’t mean much at this point but is a good reminder of their blooming feelings.

“Price or Gaz could walk in at any moment” Soap shakes his head in protest, grabbing Ghost’s balaclava and playfully showing it down.

“They’re busy in the other room. If you weren’t so loud, you would hear.”

He stops laughing, listening in closely. A faint squeak of the mattress, a series of giggles. His eyes widen, he looks at Ghost.

“They’re fucking?”

“How blind are you, Soap? Of course, they are. Maybe not right now, but in general... Now give me those lips.”

“Simon-“

“I waited all day for this, Johnny. Thought we would be cuddling in our Airbnb room by now, but having you in my bedroom is even better.”

“Aye, buy me dinner first.”

They lie down on the bed. Simon snuggles into his side, wrapping his big arms around him. They both watch the storm behind the window, snow so thick they don’t get to enjoy seeing the city by night. Soap is grateful they both share some of their body heat, his hips push back against Simon’s, his neck stretches so the man can put his nose against it.

“John” Simon whispers and it feels different, a subtle change, he

gulps. He looks around and then into his eyes, he sees something he doesn't want to name. Soap is too scared to stare at his face for too long because this is not a look someone gives to a friend. It makes him wonder.

Are they still friends? Are they trapped somewhere in between? Are they more than that?

He wants to talk about it, but at the same time, he doesn't know what to say.

"Never expected you to have a house" he admits, trying to change the subject. "I still live with my ma', but I don't come home anymore."

"You spend your leaves at the base?" Simon wonders, ruffling his hair.

"You know how she is, pushing me into finding a good lass, starting a family... She's mad I wasn't home for Christmas, and I didn't introduce a girl to her" he chuckles, cheeks growing red from embarrassment.

"Next time just tell your mom... that your girlfriend's name is Simon."

"You serious?"

"It's a big step. But think about it. You can... I have a spare room. But this bed is comfortable, and half of my drawers are empty. We can make the other room into your little painting studio. If you don't like it, we can ditch this place and find something bigger."

"Si... Simon!" he gasps.

Now that he has his answer, he can't stop grinning.

"Sorry, was it too much? Did it make you..."

He silences him with a kiss, smiling brightly.

"Why are you being so fucking perfect? Come closer, I'm cold."

Soon, they both won't feel the cold, anymore.

the blood that tastes like mud/nice looking wolf fur

October 2, 2023.

What is left of them, seeps through the open palm of his, that reaches for Soap but doesn't move more than an inch. He lets it all go, despite not wanting to. He sees Soap walk out of his life, and he lets him, he is paralyzed, it's all his fault.

The rain intensifies. Ghost watches Soap leave, he hates to see his back turned on the team, quick steps splashing the water everywhere as he flees. It's unusual for Johnny to stay silent, to give up without a proper fight, and to accept their defeat. Simon has so much to tell him, so many stories to tell, and feelings to confess - but now there's only doubt that fills his mind. Everything he's been planning for their reunion and the following days turns into "*maybe not*" instead of "*for sure*", Ghost doesn't even know if there's anything he can do right now to change it. In his typical fashion, he wants to distance himself from everyone and erase all the uncertainties - because for him, there's no such thing as in-between.

Price is holding him tight by his wrists but he breaks from the grip easily, takes a few steady strides forward - before slowly stopping mid-step as the momentum grows weaker. It's all for nothing. If Johnny doesn't want to see him, he will respect his decision. Soap won't talk to him no matter how hard he would push, and Simon won't chase after a potential quarrel followed by a tough breakup. But is there even a relationship they could end in the first place?

Is this their end?

The team drags him inside, away from the rain, trying to console his feelings. They say to give it more time and wait patiently for the man because Soap clearly needs some alone time to re-think their current situation. They all need to get used to this new, strange reality - with 141 consisting of two monsters now, monsters of such opposite natures.

Ghost is a patient man, but not when it comes to Soap.

He is so terribly sorry. His heart aches but it feels different, he experiences it as an overwhelming sense of melancholy mixed with sadness, instead of regular pain and stress - his heart doesn't pick up,

and his muscles are already too tense to clench in frustration. It doesn't sting, it doesn't hurt, it feels... empty. Emptier than before.

A part of him is missing, yes, but the love - his love stays the same. It's rooted in his heart, in his useless veins, it runs through the deepest branches of his nerves. He always wanted to be loved, but only after he left, he discovered that he wants to be loved specifically by Johnny. Now, he is deprived of that feeling, of the warmth of Soap's arms and his bright smile. Ghost's body tingles because of the stiffness, he wants to search for Johnny, but what is he supposed to do? He cannot speak for himself nor control his new urges and impulses that tell him to hunt and take, and control - until Soap accepts that there's still something to fight for. That they are not yet crossed out.

When Ghost is given some freedom to collect himself after the tiring journey, he walks to their room. No one stops him, everyone keeps their mouths shut when he disappears into the corridor that leads to the room - with his eyes cloudy and not present, back hunched. He doesn't expect Soap to be inside, he knows that Johnny won't lock himself in the most obvious of places, he is smarter than that.

Ghost knocks on the door nevertheless, the answer doesn't come. The handle clicks loudly as he is met with silence, he enters their bedroom.

It's quiet, it's empty, it lacks Johnny. He's been hoping that tonight, he would lie on their bed and cuddle with the man he loves so dearly. Instead, he sees their lives slowly fall apart as the spark of their love fades away into nothingness.

The man's presence still lingers in the air, Ghost smells Soap's shampoo along with a hint of his drugstore citrusy perfume. The room looks exactly the same as the day he left, which was months ago, maybe now it's a bit messier than usual. Ghost's clean clothes are spilling out of small drawers, the rest of them is discarded on the bed and creating a complex-looking nest. He doesn't try to understand the thought process behind it, it's clear that Soap's been missing him during all this time - more than he could ever imagine.

Ghost's lips break into a smile but it's hidden by the muzzle. He sits down on the bed. His hand reaches out to touch his clothes, he fixes them to create a perfect pile, though he doubts Soap will ever need them again. They're all wrinkled and smell like the both of them - a dangerous mix he's been addicted to ever since the first time their bodies clashed together to create something new.

From the corner of his eye, he notices the wolf fur, slung over the bed frame. His smile disappears, and his nose wrinkles in confusion. The muzzle is tight against his face, the rough edges scratch across his nose bridge and jaw.

It's surprising to see that Soap hasn't gotten rid of it yet. After a brief examination of the fuzzy contours, he decides to run his fingers through the tangled fur. It's thick and coarse, but when touched, it feels just like Soap's hair would. For an undisturbed second, he can pretend that he is actually caressing his lover, not the damn pelt that is the main source of their misfortune.

For a moment he forgets that he will probably never touch Soap like that, again.

He is sitting on the bed, but there's no Soap to hold in his arms. Ghost wants to brush the messy hair out of the man's forehead, crack a few jokes, and tell him it's time to cut the longer strands that stick out of his mohawk using the bandage scissors. He's been dreaming of this moment, of peace and quiet after the futile mission and months of physical separation. Now the only thing he can do is think of what they could do.

The perfect scenario isn't hard to imagine, he's lived through similar ones countless times, after all.

They would probably submerge themselves in the warm autumn evening, with Johnny's back pressed flush against his chest. Soap would open his sketchbook and draw with his hands shaky. Ghost would hear the crack of the pencil's graphite when it breaks - because Soap only draws what he sees, and their bed is facing the window, the tree.

He doesn't mind it one bit, but Johnny always finds a reason to fuss about it.

"You can draw the crow instead" he would point out to the bird resting right on the damp treetop, dark and unmoving. *"It doesn't have to be perfect."*

He can hear himself whispering it all with the utmost care - and Johnny would hum back in agreement, setting the rubber aside and quickly sketching the bird.

"You're right" Soap would mutter before covering them both with a blanket. Simon is good at distracting, but Soap - Soap specializes in

making him forget. Thanks to that, he doesn't even think that it's only a simple fantasy, created to make him feel better.

Because now, things are different. Even the tree is missing. Ghost looks out the window and only sees a stump peaking out from the worn grass. It's like everything he once knew starts to distort right in front of his eyes, the happy moments disappear to be replaced with tragedy. Nothing but Soap and his presence can stop it from happening. *Only Soap*, his mind repeats. *Only Soap*.

But Soap's not there.

Is it too early to mourn their relationship?

The memories of them start to flood his brain, they are as deep as the ocean floor - he needs to escape. Ghost searches for something gentler to think about, something that will make the crashing wave disappear and save him from drowning. He fails as he opens Soap's sketchbook, he doesn't go further than the first page.

A small dedication "*for Simon*" catches his eye, it's so tender and loving it makes his heart want to flutter. Ghost looks at the short line written in cursive, a confirmation that once upon a time, each stroke was made while thinking of *him*.

He turns to face the door, Nikolai opens it a few seconds later, catching him in a moment of great vulnerability - maybe his slouchy posture doesn't show it, but his gaze full of longing certainly does.

"Ghost" Nik calls, stepping closer and looking through his shoulder at the sketchbook. "Price wants to talk about our plans. Let's walk together."

In the man's simplicity, there is something commanding. Ghost shrugs his shoulders and follows him to the conference room. Gaz is already there, dragging Soap to sit in place. As much as he would like to just stand by the wall, he takes a seat nearby.

Despite the short distance between them, for Ghost, it feels like they're still thousands of kilometers apart. His senses are crushed by Soap's smell, thank Price for having his nose blocked because it's too overwhelming already. He can tell Soap shares the same sentiment - the chair scrapes the floor, the distance between them grows even more.

Ghost observes him closely.

Soap doesn't return his gaze, and Ghost isn't surprised. His appearance is completely different, eyes much lighter with pupils constricted and predacious - he looks at Soap like he wants to eat him for dinner. A part of it is true. Ever since he discovered his need for human blood, he's been wondering if he is ever going to drink from Soap. He suspects the taste to be sweet and nearly addicting, mostly because it comes from his lover. He craves to taste it almost as much as he craves for Johnny to look back.

Price grunts, demanding their attention. The atmosphere changes to one of focus, the captain looks at his computer with confusion crossing through his face - he clicks his mouse very slowly and very loudly. Finally, he displays a map, locating a facility located in the middle of nowhere. Ghost doesn't recognize the place, he only sees a river splitting the land in half, a few buildings looking rather too improvised to be considered a real military base.

"Makarov's gone, but his men certainly aren't" Price sighs, looking over the room to see his soldiers visibly split up. "Information hacked from the satellite display a few bases located around Onega River. We need someone to check it and see what's going on there. In the meantime, the Russians are still in Al Mazrah."

"Looks like we need to be in two places at the same time" Gaz mutters, Ghost nods at his words. Soap immediately speaks, not letting anyone interfere.

"I'll go to Russia, then. Seems like a job easy enough for one person. I'll then join you in Al Mazrah."

As much as Ghost wants to make it easy and distance himself, he can't let Soap go alone. He raises his hand and Price shakes his head. No. Captain's lips are pressed into a thin line, slowly turning purple.

"I'm not letting you two kill each other. I can call for backup and see if our KorTac friends can help."

"But someone has to keep an eye on Soap, he can be dangerous" Gaz argues, and Ghost feels grateful for the interjection. He lets out a small huff, audible enough for everyone in the room. "Besides, KorTac deals with enough as for now. They probably won't help."

"He's only dangerous during the full moon, Kyle" Price answers, rubbing his temples. Ghost watches the man reaching for another cigar, he is clearly exhausted of them already.

"Let Ghost go, for fuck's sake. The kids will be alright" Nikolai speaks, his Russian accent thicker than ever. Ghost raises his head, surprised to see others supporting his case. He really needs Price to listen.

"Alright, alright" Price agrees under all the pressure. The captain and Soap look less than happy from this turn of events, but clearly, they got outvoted. Soap doesn't say anything yet, crossing his arms and exhaling loudly. Ghost can feel Soap's heat leaking into the air and he can't help but be drawn by it. Price's next words stop him from moving, though. "Nikolai, when can you drop them off?"

"I will call my friends and see what I can do" Nikolai nods, standing up immediately and leaving the room - outdated flip phone already pressed to his ear.

"I guess that leaves Al Mazrah for us, Gaz" Price says. "I'll introduce you to the details, later. For now, you're all free to go. But Soap, stay for a moment."

Soap groans, but he politely stays in his seat. Ghost leaves the room, and he doesn't really go anywhere - instead, he decides to stay and listen. He is curious to know what will Price ever say.

"*I don't want Ghost to go*" Soap argues immediately after the door closes shut. Ghost's jaw clenches, he wants to protest himself, yet he isn't taking part in this conversation.

"You have to feed him once in a while. He needs blood to survive" Price says, not acknowledging Soap's words. It makes him feel a tingle of hope, but what is an expanse of his trust and freedom limits Soap's ones, too. *"I'll make sure to give you a few extra pouches of blood."*

"Hell no, I'm not stepping anywhere near him."

"Soap, yes you will. That's an order, do you have any problems with that?"

"No sir"

"Good, that's what I thought. You're dismissed. Go get some sleep, you look like shit, son."

Soap storms out of the room. Ghost pushes himself into the wall and out of the man's way but Soap doesn't even notice him standing there. It's like he's invisible, not only to the mirrors.

The night comes, he doesn't know what to do with himself. Wandering around the forest and following tracks left by Soap, Ghost protects himself from the pouring rain, walking far from the fence, yet close enough to see the base.

He spots Soap through the window. The man is bathed in the silver glow of the moonlight, he doesn't do much besides sitting in the armchair and napping under a blanket. The view is cozy, Soap's body seems to be calling for him - Ghost tries to ignore this itch. He keeps his distance despite the desire to be close, he stays in the shadows of the forest.

Watching him feels illegal, but maybe it's a sin that derives from his nature. There's a piece of ripped clothing that hangs from a branch, he snatches it as soon as he realizes it belongs to Johnny. He can't smell it as distinctly as he wishes to, but when he sees the blood staining the rough edges, he immediately presses it against the front of his muzzle.

Ghost wants to taste it so badly, he groans in frustration when he can't reach past his nuzzle, he claws at the locks again. Soap's blood smells like something thick and heavy, like mud that coats the ground. Maybe the rain makes it this way, but he doesn't care. His eyes roll inside his skull, he can feel his pants tighten uncomfortably.

Ghost doesn't expect his body to react this way, but he doesn't try to reject his arousal. His eyes search for Johnny, he wants to pretend that the man is right by his side. He wants him but he can't get him.

If God exists, he damns the hand that grips the stained fabric and reaches for Ghost's zipper. Ghost doesn't control his reactions, bucking his hips into the emptiness of the night. The desire blooms in his chest and comes out as a broken growl.

His wrist starts to throb after a while but he chooses to ignore it, too busy chasing the unknown type of pleasure that tingles in his body - raw and animalistic, one that reminds him that he still stands and breathes, somehow functions. But only for Soap.

January 2, 2023.

Ghost rolls his eyes when Price shoots him a serious glance. Soap is asleep on the plane, relaxed in his window seat. It's not an unusual sight, Soap falls asleep whenever he finds a peaceful place next to Simon. But his hand, his hand is right in Ghost's, their fingers laced

loosely together. Ghost's thumb brushes across the tanned silkiness, a satisfied hum leaves his lips.

He could use a nap himself, they didn't sleep much during the night, after all. Ghost looks around and then notices that Gaz is pressed against their captain's arm, drooling all over the man. He laughs, knowing full well that the old man won't stand the teasing once he tells Soap.

"You want to tell me about something, son?" Price asks, and Ghost laughs even more. The more time he spends with 141, the more he learns from them. All the violence and death, and danger - it makes him crave softness, which his team offers without wanting anything in return.

"It's nothing" he whispers across the empty alley. "He's just clingy when he sleeps."

"Same as Kyle. If I try to move, he'll drag me back to cuddle. I'm trapped."

"You and him?" he asks, trying to tease his captain.

"Same thing as you and him" Price points at sleeping Soap.

"You're old enough to be his dad" he snickers, shaking his head in disbelief, his tongue clicks. Of course, he knew all about it much earlier than that, but they never got a chance to discuss it openly. It surprises him that he even dares to open his mouth to make a comment, as he is typically less forward than that.

"I'm 38, you cheeky bastard. And he calls me daddy instead of dad" Price teases, Ghost snorts.

"Simon" Soap mutters. "Shut the fuck up, I can't sleep."

Ghost presses his lips against Soap's forehead. It's weird to do it in front of Price at first, but then, it's only them in that plane, it's only them against the world.

Ghost is so exhausted after their flight that he drags his bag across the floor. Of course, Soap scolds him for his childish behavior, and he gives in - picking it up and carrying it over his shoulder. The airport is busy, he doesn't expect so many tourists to arrive here. Price and Gaz

are walking behind them, he can hear their voices blending into the loud chatter. He and Soap are too tired to talk.

They are almost by the exit, when Soap drags him to the side. The man walks to the nearby gift shop to look at the colorful souvenirs, Ghost looks around. Near the door, there are more stands, in one of them he sees something shining in the artificial light. He grabs Soap's hand and takes him closer to investigate. Johnny laughs and he smiles underneath his mask, a glimpse in his eye promising to buy him whatever stupid gift his heart desires.

As they squeeze through the crowd of tourists, the stand looks clearer, it's filled with all kinds of animal furs. One of them steals his attention, a fine wolf fur. Funnily enough, it looks similar in color to Soap's hair, a part of him sticks to this sentiment. It would make a cozy rug in his apartment, but he isn't sure it's the true purpose of it.

"Look, nice furs" Soap says, as if he's reading his mind.

"They're fine, I guess" he mutters, not expressing any interest.

They don't stop to look closer, they walk past the furs and to the exit. Once he sees the prices, he thinks. It's cheap, it looks nice.

Who knows, maybe he can give it to Johnny as a late Christmas gift.

End Notes

Hi, hello, and thanks for reading! As you can see I (a maniac) am writing yet another story. Let's see it unravel, yeah?

Updates every weekend, kudos and comments are most appreciated <3

also, I reactivated my Tumblr account, you can chat with me at @torierra (the account is empty but I might post some art there)

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!